

A Bowl of Rice Too Far: The Burma Campaign of the Japanese Fifteenth Army

A Monograph

by

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Abstract

A Bowl of Rice Too Far: The Burma Campaign of the Japanese Fifteenth Army, by MAJ Peter Crosthwaite, 47 pages.

In 1942 the Japanese Fifteenth Army overwhelmed the Allied forces defending Burma. However, in just two short years the Allied forces, spearheaded by the British Fourteenth Army, shattered the Fifteenth Army. The purpose of this study is to examine how and why the situation in Burma radically changed. The investigation frames the Burma campaign, using the three criteria of massed effects at the decisive point, air superiority, and operational reach. The elements are used to assess quantitative changes to the Japanese Fifteenth and British Fourteenth Armies and to evaluate the Japanese decision to conduct Operation U-Go. The study concludes that the Japanese decision to launch Operation U-Go was detrimental to the Fifteenth Army's Burma campaign, and presented FM Slim an opportunity for victory in the theater. It describes how advantages in the three criteria transitioned from the Japanese possession in 1942, to the British in 1944. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance and relationship of elements of operational art to military operations. The Fifteenth Army's campaign demonstrates what can result when military planners fail to appreciate the linkage between the elements of operational art and their effect on combat operations.

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Acronyms

AVG – American Volunteer Group

FM – Field Marshal

IGHQ – Imperial General Headquarters (Japan)

IGS – Imperial General Staff (Japan)

JAAF – Japanese Army Air Force

RAF – Royal Air Force

USAAF – United States Army Air Force

WWII – World War II

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Introduction

Thus, those skilled at making the enemy move do so by creating a situation to which he must conform; they entice him with something he is certain to take, and with lures of ostensible profit they await him in strength. Therefore a skilled commander seeks victory from the situation and does not demand it of his subordinates.

—Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

“In the rain, with no place to sit, we took short spells of sleep standing on our feet. The bodies of our comrades who had struggled along the track before us, lay all around, rain-sodden and giving off the stench of decomposition. Even with the support of our sticks we fell amongst the corpses again as we stumbled on rocks and tree roots made bare by the rain and attempted one more step, then one more step in our exhaustion.”¹ The Japanese soldier painted a dark and foreboding picture of jungle warfare in the Burma Theater in World War II. His exhaustion and despair are evident following the brutal defeat at the hands of the British Fourteenth Army. His diary entry underscored the harsh reality of war for soldiers on the ground. They are the ones who pay the price for ill-planned operations. This is what operational overreach feels like to soldiers executing plans that failed to account for an operation’s duration and distance. The soldiers suffered and died because the Japanese Fifteenth Army selected objectives that surpassed their military capacity. In essence, General Renya Mutaguchi, the commander of the Japanese Fifteenth Army, demanded victory from his subordinates, not the situation. The story of the Fifteenth Army offers a lesson regarding the dangers of operational overreach, when strategic objectives exceed the tactical means available to achieve them. The overreach occurs because a commander fails to understand the situation.

The purpose of this study is to examine how and why the situation in Burma radically changed from 1942 to 1944. The study evaluated why the Fifteenth Army’s decision to conduct

¹ Kazuo Tamayama and John Nunneley, *Tales by Japanese soldiers of the Burma campaign 1942-5* (London, 2000), 178.

Operation U-Go was detrimental to its Burma campaign. It analyzed how the context changed for both the Japanese Fifteenth and the British Fourteenth Armies. The assessment used elements of operational art, specifically, massed effects at the decisive point, air superiority, and operational reach to describe how and why the changes to the armies' structures and operations produced markedly different results in 1942 and 1944. The evaluation underscored the complementary and synergistic relationship between the elements of operational art. It also reinforced the importance of evaluating both combatants in a military campaign. War is a clash of wills and as a result, requires an assessment of both sides to attribute casual explanations for the military outcomes.

Research Question

Was the Japanese Fifteenth Army's decision to conduct Operation U-Go detrimental to its Burma campaign, thereby presenting an opportunity for FM Slim's victory? To address the primary question the following secondary research questions were answered: First, did the Japanese or Allied armies achieve massed effects in the decisive battles in Burma from 1942-1944? Second, which army possessed air superiority in Burma in 1942 and 1944? Finally, how was the Japanese Fifteenth Army and British Fourteenth Army's operational reach affected by operations in Burma during 1942 and 1944?

The researcher assumed the three criteria of massed effects at the decisive point, air superiority, and operational reach were reflective of an army's qualitative situation in the Burma theater. It is further assumed that the three factors had a direct correlation to an army's level of combat power brought to bear during the battles in Burma. Finally, it is assumed the three factors played a critical role in the outcome of military operations within the Theater.

Military operations on the Asian continent in the China-Burma-India Theater in 1942 and 1944 were included for analysis. The focus was specifically placed on the Japanese Army's conduct of warfare within the Burma Theater. It excluded the greater Pacific, North African, and European Theaters of Operation. The researcher narrowed the focus to assess measurable aspects

of specific elements of operational art. Analyses of the changes to the elements suggested qualitative changes to the situation and offered an explanation for the outcome of events.²

There is gap in the literature regarding the Burma theater of operation. The majority of writings produced in English on the Burma campaign were penned by Western authors.³ Their works portrayed the events from a Western perspective and failed to adequately depict the Japanese viewpoint. As a result, the decisions and actions of the Japanese Fifteenth Army have not been explored in great detail. Instead, the literature focused on Field Marshal (FM) William Slim, the commander of the British Fourteenth Army. The majority of the works overwhelmingly attributed the Allied victory to Slim's military prowess and leadership abilities. Slim is shown below in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Field Marshal William Slim, 1947

Source: National Army Museum.

FM William Slim was a British General in WWII, who later rose to the rank of Chief of

² Quantitative assessments use measurable data that allows a researcher to compare events separated over space and time with objective criteria. Differences in the data can then be used to hypothesize about how the changes contributed to or influenced the outcome of the event.

³ Examples of primary source Western authors are FM William Slim, John Masters, *The Road Past Mandalay* (London: Cassell, 1961), James Lunt, *The Retreat from Burma* (Wiltshire: David & Charles Publishers, 1989), Joseph W. Stilwell, *The Stilwell Papers* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1948), and Ian Grant, *Burma: The Turning Point* (South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Books Limited, 2003). Their memoirs are written based upon their personal experiences and do not present the Japanese perspective of events in Burma.

the Imperial General Staff in 1948. Becoming head of the British Army was a significant accomplishment for a man from a modest background. Slim was born into a lower-middle-class family in the late 19th century. He began his military service in 1914 at the outbreak of WWI. Slim served in both the Gallipoli and Mesopotamia campaigns during the war, where he gained valuable leadership and staff experience. He spent the majority of the interwar years in the British India command, rising to the rank of lieutenant colonel prior to the outbreak of hostilities. He began the war serving in the Mediterranean and Middle East Theaters, fighting the Italians and Vichy French before being moved to the Burma Theater.⁴

In March 1942, the British Army appointed Slim to command the Burma Corps. The unit was in retreat and utter disarray. The Imperial Japanese Army had routed the Corps' defenses and seized control of Rangoon and southern Burma. The Japanese Army's seizure of Rangoon severed the British sea lines of communication to Burma. It isolated the Burma Corps because no over-land line of communication had been established between India and Burma. The situation was dire for Slim and the Burma Corps. It proved to be one of the most challenging of his career. Confronted by defeat, Slim reframed the problem. He analyzed the Japanese Army's war fighting tactics assessing both their strengths and weaknesses. Slim used this analysis to develop a new approach that blunted the Japanese strengths and exploited their weaknesses.⁵ He sought victory from the situation instead of demanding it from his subordinates.

Notwithstanding FM Slim's masterful role as an army general in the Burma campaign, excessive focus on him detracts from other causal explanations.⁶ For instance, enemy actions, the

⁴ Brian Bond, "The Army Level of Command: General Sir William Slim and Fourteenth Army in Burma," *British and Japanese Military Leadership in the Far Eastern War 1941-1945* (New York: Frank Cass, 2004), 38-40

⁵ FM William Slim, *Defeat into Victory* (London: Pan Books, 1999), 115, 19-36; Brian Bond, "The Army Level of Command: General Sir William Slim and Fourteenth Army in Burma," *British and Japanese Military Leadership in the Far Eastern War 1941-1945*. 38-40.

⁶ Eliot Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes, The Anatomy of Failure in War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 21-34. Cohen argues that the military, due to its dogma,

environment, and contextual factors all contributed to the final outcome of the campaign. Carl von Clausewitz, the 19th century Prussian military theorist, suggested war was a collision between two living forces attempting to impose their will upon each other. Military leaders do not engage against a lifeless mass, but rather a thinking and adaptive adversary.⁷ Clausewitz's notions are a helpful reminder to evaluate both sides in a campaign study. Doing so builds a more complete understanding of the events that transpired and how and why they occurred. Describing how and why the situation changed for the British Fourteenth and Japanese Fifteenth Armies, during 1942-1944, offers a more comprehensive picture of the Burma campaign and suggests reasons outside of FM Slim's control which contributed to the campaign's outcomes. Therefore, the study reframes the battle for Burma, by describing both how and why the Japanese Army's situation deteriorated following its seizure of Burma in 1942 to its defeat in 1944.

Background to the Study

Burma (now known as Myanmar) is located in Southeast Asia between India, China, and modern day Thailand. The country is roughly the size of Texas, covering approximately 240,000 square miles. Burma was a holding of the British Empire prior to World War II. The British conquered Burma in the mid 19th century and co-opted the local elite to administratively rule the land as part of the British sovereignty. There were two major cities in Burma; Rangoon, the large Southern coastal port, and Mandalay, located along the banks of the Irrawaddy River in the country's interior. The Burmese climate is hot and tropical with two seasons; a dry season from November to May and a monsoon season from June to October. The monsoon season changed the

attributes too much responsibility to the commander. His work focused on military failure, but a similar mindset could be applied to military success as well.

⁷ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Peter Paret and Michael Howard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 75-77, 141.

country's interior landscape.⁸ It flooded the inner lowlands, swelling the rivers and rendering the valleys virtually impassable.

Burma is covered by rivers, jungles, and mountain ranges. There are three major river networks that flow from north to south following the elongated shape of the country. The Chindwin, Irrawaddy, and Salween Rivers partition the country into four separate segments which limits mobility and accessibility throughout Burma. The rivers were major military obstacles that required substantial planning and resources to successfully transit. For example the Irrawaddy, the mightiest of the four rivers, is 1,300 miles in length and is three miles wide in certain places.⁹ Slim, noted the river's significance and referred to the Irrawaddy as one of the world's great rivers. Understanding the environment required an understanding of the rivers, their tributaries, and the locations as well as capacities of their crossing sites. That knowledge was crucial to a good defensive plan and a feasible offensive plan in Burma. The rivers dominated the terrain. However, the mountain ranges also complemented the rivers by isolating and further dividing the country.

⁸ Gerald Astor, *The Jungle War: Mavericks, Marauders, and Madmen in the China Burma-India Theater of World War II* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2004), 6; Sir James Kirby, et al., *The War Against Japan, Volume II* (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1958), 1-5; Charles F. Romanus and Riley Sunderland, US Army in World War II, *China-Burma-India Theater: Stillwell's Mission to China* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2002), 82.

⁹ Gerald Astor, *The Jungle War*, 6. Charles F. Romanus and Riley Sunderland, US Army in World War II, *China-Burma-India Theater: Stillwell's Mission to China*, 82.



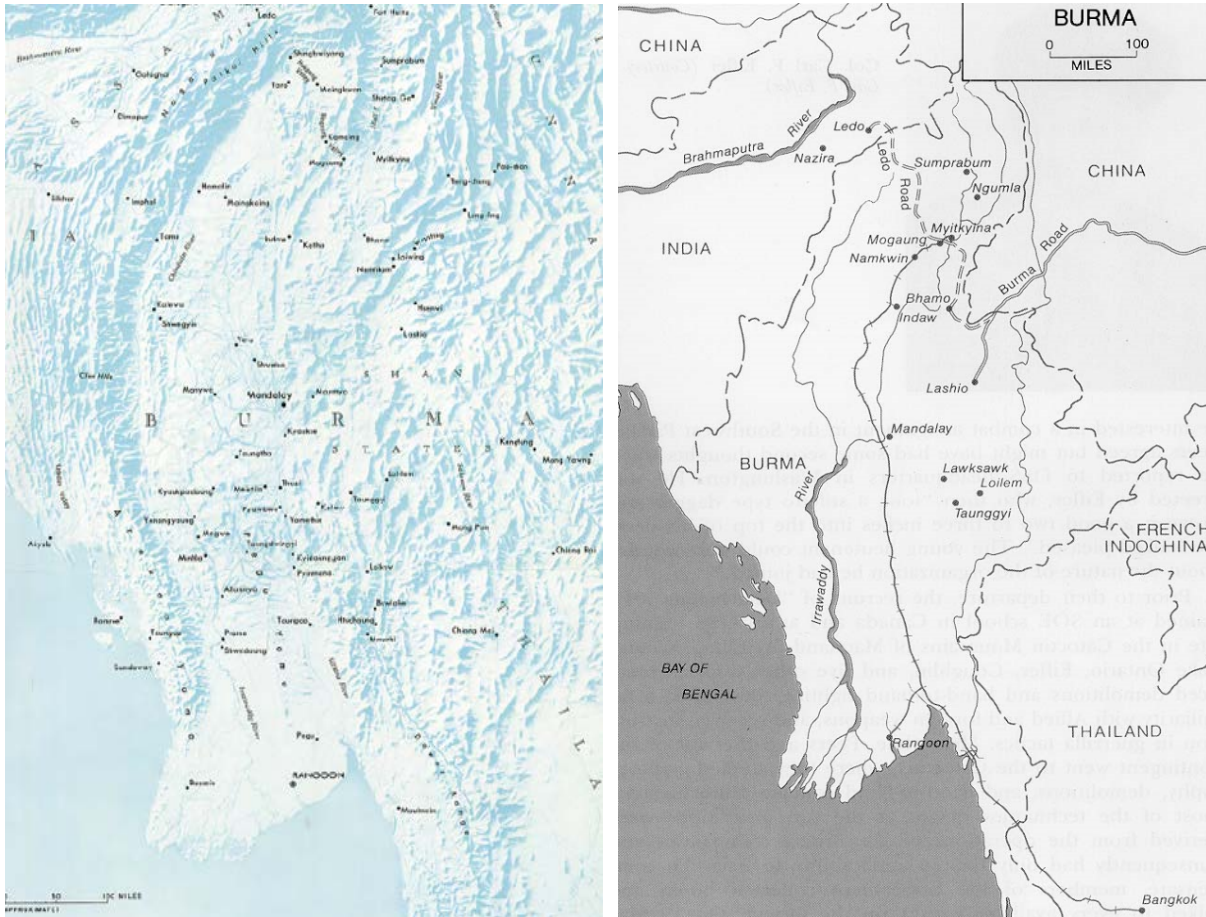
Figure 2. US Services Supply Convoy crossing the Irrawaddy. The picture of the Irrawaddy helps to depict the massive size of the river. The rivers dominated the terrain in Burma.

Source: US Army in World War II, *Pictorial Record: The War Against Japan* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2006), 430.

The mountain ranges paralleled the courses of the rivers running in north-to-south axes. The mountains separated Burma from the neighboring states of India, China, and Thailand. The mountains were steep and predominately impassable by ground. James Lunt, a Major serving in the 2nd Burma Brigade, described the Burma mountain ranges as, “virtually trackless, jungle-covered, razor backed hills” and “tangled masses of knife-edged ridges and almost bottomless valleys, covered in jungle, riddled with fevers of every kind.”¹⁰ In light of these observations it is apparent that Burma’s terrain and climate played a substantial role in the planning and conduct of military activities. It complicated lines of communication and ground based military operations. Nothing came easy in combat in this terrain. It tested men, material, and machines alike. Burma was not a place most countries would prefer to fight a war. Yet, in 1942, WWII came to Burma. The Allied forces fought in Burma for different reasons. The British wanted to maintain

¹⁰ James Lunt, *The Retreat from Burma*, 30-33.

possession of their imperial holding and the Americans wanted to preserve access to China.



Figures 3 & 4. Maps of Burma. Map 1 depicts locations of mountainous terrain within Burma. Map 2 shows the location of the railroad line connecting Rangoon to the Burma Road and China.

Source: US Army in World War II. *Stillwell's Mission to China* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2002), map insert.

The Allies used Northern Burma as an overland route to China. Burma's ports, roads, and railways provided the Allied forces a line of communication to supply China with vital materials and equipment under the lend/lease agreement. The Burma Road was critical to the Allied strategy of presenting multiple dilemmas to the Japanese military. It provided a mechanism for the Allies to support China, whose continued presence in the war forced Japan to dedicate significant resources in both manpower and materiel to the Asian mainland. Moreover, it prevented those Japanese forces from being reallocated to other Theaters, allowing for greater

Allied freedom of movement.¹¹ However, Japan changed the situation in Burma in the beginning of 1942, forcing an Allied withdrawal.

In January 1942 the Japanese Army stormed into Burma and overwhelmed the Allied defense forces. The Japanese launched a lightning three pronged attack into Burma on January 20th with two divisions of the Fifteenth Army. They initiated the assault maneuvering through jungle passes that led from Siam and Malaya into Burma. The attack relied upon Japan's light infantry enveloping British and Chinese forces by maneuvering through the jungles and seizing key terrain, such as road intersections, in the Allied forces' rear areas. Once the terrain was seized, the Japanese established roadblocks that hampered the British Army's mobility. The assault separated and isolated British Army units. The speed of the offensive prevented the British from developing a cohesive defense. The Japanese severed the British Army's lines of communication because of the British overreliance on motorized forces that require roads. The Japanese forced the British to choose between withdrawing to reestablish their broken lines of communication or defending against the Japanese advance to their immediate front.¹² In effect, the Japanese use of envelopment and roadblock tactics placed their road-bound adversary at a distinct disadvantage. Furthermore, the British lack of air superiority exacerbated an already precarious situation. The British did not have a large enough air fleet in Burma. Their insufficient number of aircraft could not provide effective close air support to counter the strong Japanese thrust. The Japanese Army soundly defeated the British Burma Corps and forced the longest

¹¹ Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun, The American War with Japan* (New York: Random House, 1985), 327-328; Joseph W. Stillwell, *The Stilwell Papers*, 107-108; Maurice Matloff and Edward M. Snell, *US Army in World War II, Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare, 1941-1942* (Washington: CMH, 1959), 78.

¹² Edward J. Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army, Its Rise and Fall, 1853-1945* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 225; FM William Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, 92-98; James Lunt, *The Retreat From Burma*, 132-145, 238-243. Joseph W. Stillwell, *The Stilwell Papers*, 63, 87-88; Don Moser, *China-Burma-India, World War II* (Alexandria: Time-Life Books, 1978), 22 and 137.

withdrawal in the history of the British Army. In the end, the British retreat from Burma was just short of one thousand miles across broken, disease-ridden jungle, lasting for five excruciating months.¹³ The Japanese Army secured a lopsided victory in Burma in 1942, but in just two short years the roles reversed. In 1944, it was the Japanese Fifteenth Army broken and defeated, retreating in disarray through the Burmese jungles. Operation U-Go, the failed India offensive, intensified this drastic change in fortunes.

The Japanese Army launched Operation U-Go on March 8, 1944.¹⁴ The offensive was a four month operation, with the stated objectives to “capture and secure strategic areas near Imphal and in northeastern India, for the defense of Burma.”¹⁵ The Japanese Fifteenth Army, under the command of General Renya Mutaguchi, led the attack, which consisted of a multi-pronged assault executed by the 15th, 31st, and 33rd Divisions. Their goal was to seize key terrain along the Allied ground and air lines of communication, thereby interdicting the supply lines of the British and US forces and compelling their removal from the Theater. The offensive was a catastrophe. The British Fourteenth Army shattered the Fifteenth Army. Japan lost 65,000 of the 155,000 soldiers committed to the offensive, with casualty rates reaching 85-90 percent within combat units.¹⁶ The operation eradicated the hope of the Japanese Army’s defense of Burma. The Fifteenth Army was now at the mercy of the British Fourteenth Army.

The Japanese military’s decision to conduct Operation U-Go left it vulnerable to an Allied counterattack in Burma. The operation exceeded the operational reach of the Fifteenth Army. The Army did not have sufficient combat power to achieve the strategic objectives of

¹³ Edward J. Drea, *Japan’s Imperial Army, Its Rise and Fall*, 225; James Lunt, *The Retreat from Burma*, xvii.

¹⁴ Charles Romanus and Riley Sunderland, *US Army in World War II, China-Burma India Theater: Stillwell’s Command Problem*, 174.

¹⁵ Saburo Hayashi and Alvin Coox, *Kogun: The Japanese Army in the Pacific War* (Quantico: Marine Corp Association, 1959), 95.

¹⁶ Charles Romanus and Riley Sunderland, *US Army in World War II, China-Burma India Theater: Stillwell’s Command Problem*, 195.

Operation U-Go. The Japanese planners failed to balance its finite resources and sequence the Army's tactical actions in time and space to achieve their strategic objectives.

The evaluation of the Japanese Burma Campaign begins with a wider discussion of the three criteria: massed effects at the decisive point, air superiority, and operational reach. Next, a description of the methodology used to examine the hypothesis and sub-hypotheses is presented, followed by an outline of the strategic context of the Burma campaign. The strategic context details aspects of the Japanese culture and WWII strategy which pertained to operations within Burma. The analysis continues through case studies of the Japanese Fifteenth and the British Fourteenth Armies, detailing quantitative changes to the criteria from 1942 to 1944. The evaluation concludes with a summary of the findings and offers a larger discussion on implications to the modern military planner.

Criteria

There are three related concepts that are useful for assessing the qualitative situation of the opposing armies in Burma. The concepts of massed effects at the decisive point, air superiority, and operational reach aid in evaluating the basis for the Japanese strategic decisions to conduct Operation U-Go in the Burma campaign. The concept of massed effects at the decisive point is a Jominian principle of war. Antoine Henri Jomini was a Swiss born, 19th century military theorist.¹⁷ Jomini's theory suggested the principle aim in war was to achieve mass at critical points on the battlefield, known as decisive points. He believed that achieving mass at the decisive point led to victory in battle.¹⁸ However, the principle is reliant upon the commander identifying what is decisive and when to mass his forces effects to achieve it. Identifying the

¹⁷ Napoleon offered Jomini a commission in the French Army after reading a military analysis written by Jomini. As a result, Jomini had personal experience with Napoleon and witnessed his planning and preparations in both victory and defeat.

¹⁸ Henri Antoine Jomini, *The Art of War*, translated by G.H. Mendell and W.P. Craighill (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippencott & Co., 1862), 70-71.

wrong location or massing effects at an inopportune place and time, leaves an army vulnerable in other locations on the battlefield. An army cannot mass its forces at all locations simultaneously. Therefore, decisions are made to prioritize when and where an army applies its mass.

The second criterion of air superiority is complementary to the first. Attaining air superiority increases a commander's ability to mass effects at the decisive point. It enables a commander to both increase firepower as well as increase the number of troops in the critical area by rapid transportation. The latter was a key aspect in the defeat of the Japanese during the Burma campaign. Finally the third aspect of operational reach provides a commander the logistical capacity to employ his forces during an operation. Failing to properly plan for an army's logistical requirements, reduces a commander's ability to mass his forces at the decisive point and can lead to defeat in battle. The intensity of the relationship between the three aspects varies depending on environmental conditions and the situation within a given operation. In the Burma theater, the three aspects proved critical to the final outcome and the ultimate Japanese defeat. Both the Japanese and British commanders believed they could achieve mass at the decisive point, but only one was successful.

Massed Effects at the Decisive Point

Jomini identified mass as the fundamental principle in war. He suggested an army's goal was to maneuver against an adversary to achieve mass at the decisive points in a theater of war.¹⁹ However, the increase in military motorization and production of lethal equipment brought about by the industrial revolution, and the rapid growth of nationalist armies modified the concept. Mass at the decisive point transitioned to massed effects, due to an army's increased size and capacity to employ lethal effects. Massing the most troops became of secondary importance to the

¹⁹ Henri Antoine Jomini, *The Art of War*, 70-71.

capability of concentrating the most firepower at a given location.²⁰ Although, the concept is seemingly simple, the principle requires a skilled military commander to identify the locations of the decisive points within the Theater, and then, to maneuver his forces to achieve mass in relation to the enemy. The latter element proved exceptionally challenging in the Burma theater of operations.

General J. Lawton Collins, an American commander in the South Pacific during WWII, once told an audience there are three things to consider before a battle, “terrain, terrain, and terrain.”²¹ Burma’s dense jungles, river networks, and undulating hills restricted army ground movement to a select group of mobility corridors. Possession of key locations, such as supply depots, airfields, and bridges, within the corridors provided a marked advantage for the army who retained them. Both the Japanese and the British Armies realized these locations would be critical to the final outcome of the campaign.

The Japanese Fifteenth Army planned Operation U-Go to seize control of key terrain, Imphal and Kohima, held by British in the Assam region of Eastern India. The locations served as British supply depots and offered an avenue of approach into Burma by way of the Tiddim road. General Renya Mutaguchi and Field Marshal William Slim identified the locations as decisive to the success of their campaigns in Burma. Mutaguchi believed the Japanese would be able to deceive, separate, and defeat the British forces in detail. This would provide him the opportunity to mass his forces against numerically inferior British forces at both Imphal and Kohima. However, Slim recognized the threat and used his air assets to reposition and resupply his forces

²⁰ G.K. Alexander, “Operational Artillery in the Korean War,” Monograph (Fort Leavenworth: School of Advanced Military Studies, 2013), 13-18; Dewey A. Granger, “Integration of Lethal and Nonlethal Fires: The Future of the Joint Fires Cell,” Monograph (Fort Leavenworth: School of Advanced Military Studies, 2009), 14-20.

²¹ Gerald Astor, *The Jungle War*, 366.

defending the key terrain. The repositioning of 5th Indian Division provided the British with numerical superiority at Imphal, and thus massed its effects at the decisive point. The British achieved this advantage by controlling the skies.

Air Superiority

In modern warfare, air superiority is integral to the successful conduct of a campaign and/or military operation. As defined by the US military, “air superiority is the degree of dominance in the air battle of one force over another that permits the conduct of operations by the former and its related land, maritime, and air forces at a given time and place without prohibitive interference by the opposing force’s air and missile threats.”²² From WWII to present day, domination of the skies has enabled military operations and created greater flexibility for its possessor to bring the full weight of his military resources to bear.

John Warden, a retired US Air Force officer and military theorist suggested that air superiority was a necessity to succeed in combat. In his book, *The Air Campaign*, Warden argued the importance of controlling the skies during war. He cited historical examples ranging from the 1939 German invasion of Poland to the 1973 Arab Israeli War to support his theory. Warden claimed “no country has won a war in the face of air superiority, no major offensive has succeeded against an opponent who controlled the air, and no defense had sustained itself against an enemy who had air superiority.”²³ Although extreme at times, Warden’s argument is a useful construct that describes how and why the situation in Burma initially favored the Japanese, but later transitioned to the Allied forces. Warden’s assertions combined with US military doctrine offer another way to frame the Burmese campaign.

²² Joint Publication (JP) 3-01, *Countering Air and Missile Threats* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 2012), 1-2.

²³ John Warden, *The Air Campaign: Planning for Combat* (Washington DC: National Defense University, 1988), 4.

US doctrine states gaining air supremacy is achieved through a process of offensive and defensive counterair. The offensive measures' aim is to destroy enemy air and missile assets on bases or over enemy territory, whereas the defensive measures' goal is to protect friendly air and missile assets. Air superiority is both spatially and temporally limited. The degree of controlling the skies can range from local coverage to theater-wide air dominance.²⁴ It further suggests air superiority is limited and intimately related to the quantity and type of air assets dedicated to an area.

Eric Bergerud, author of *Fire in the Sky, The Air War in the South Pacific*, provides an excellent overview and qualitative analysis of the air craft used, by the Allies and Japanese, in the Pacific theater during WWII. In his book, Bergerud, discussed technical and performance aspects of the specific air platforms used in Burma. One of his key points was that the Japanese Army flew mainly three types of aircraft during the Burma campaign which were all designed for combat operations against the Chinese and Soviet militaries, not the Allied forces. As a result, Bergerud believed, "the Japanese army, built a fighter for the wrong war."²⁵ By the end of the war the Japanese aircraft did not qualitatively compare to the improved Allied aircraft. The deficiencies in the Japanese aircraft coupled with their limited wartime production capacity factored decisively into the dramatic shift in air superiority during the Burma campaign.²⁶

Operational Reach

A military's operational reach is the ability to utilize its forces in combat against an adversary in an operational environment. US military doctrine, *JP 5-0*, defines operational reach

²⁴ Joint Publication (JP) 3-01, *Countering Air and Missile Threats*, 1-3, 1-2.

²⁵ Eric M. Bergerud, *Fire in the Sky, The Air War in the South Pacific* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 219.

²⁶ Eric M. Bergerud, *Fire in the Sky*, 219-225. The three types of aircraft were a pursuit fighter, the Nakajima Ki43 (Allied codename: Oscar), and two bombers, the Kawasaki Ki48 (Allied codename: Lily) and the Mitsubishi G4M (Allied codename: Betty).

as “the distance and duration across which a joint force can successfully employ military capabilities.”²⁷ It correlates with an army’s ability to logistically sustain its operation to the completion of its objectives. There are multiple factors which influence an army’s operational reach, including: the operational environment, an army’s logistical capabilities, and the enemy’s location and disposition. Each is discussed in greater detail below.

The operational environment limits an army’s reach, due to the terrain and weather. Terrain plays a critical role in determining the route, speed, and formation an army uses to traverse an area. In Burma, the terrain restricted both armies’ movements because of the rolling hills, dense jungle, and large rivers. The terrain dictated the number of feasible maneuver corridors and river crossing sites available to the armies. It made creating and maintaining long lines of communication difficult for either of the opposing forces. Moreover, the environment becomes even more restrictive when factoring in the battlefield effects of the weather. Burma had two seasons, either wet or dry. Ground military operations came to a stand-still during the wet season, because the country’s low lying floodplains would turn into marshes further restricting military movement.²⁸ In sum, the operational environment created a difficult situation before even considering an army’s logistical capability.

In the Burma campaign the Japanese predominantly relied upon pack animals to move their ground supplies throughout the Theater. They were not a vehicle based army like the British. The Japanese tactics of envelopment and jungle maneuvers complemented their foot-based army and logistical system. Their aggressive approach relied on the capture of enemy supplies to supplement their operations. As a result, they left a very small logistical margin for error.

²⁷ Joint Publication (JP) 5-0, *Joint Operations Planning* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 2012), III-33.

²⁸ Ian Grant and Kazuo Tamayama, *Burma 1942: The Japanese Invasion*, 61; Japanese Monograph Series 134, “Burma Operations Record 15th Army Operations in Imphal Area and Withdrawal to Northern Burma” (Headquarters United States Army, Japan, 1957), 72,118; Ronald Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun*, 372.

Furthermore, successful Japanese operations had a similar trait of short lines of communication. The Japanese army's critical vulnerability was projecting and sustaining an army across long lines of communication without the benefit of seizing enemy supplies. It was not until Operation U-Go in 1944, that the army's logistical limitations were exposed.²⁹ The Japanese Fifteenth Army failed to capture the British supplies at Imphal and Kohima and as a result could not sustain its forces or achieve massed effects at the decisive point.

A relationship exists between the three criteria of massed effects at decisive points, air superiority, and operational reach. Possession of air superiority increases an army's ability to mass its effects as well as extending its operational reach. The three concepts planned for and executed in concert generate a marked advantage for an army. This section discussed the significance of the concepts as they related to the Burma theater in WWII. The three criteria offer a lens to investigate and reframe the Burma campaign of the Fifteenth Army.

Methodology

The objective of this study is to reframe the WWII Burma campaign, offering insights into additional factors that contributed to the final outcomes. Case studies of the Japanese Fifteenth and British Fourteenth Armies are presented and structured around the three criteria detailed above. The standards of measure are massed effects at the decisive point, air superiority, and operational reach. The items were chosen to demonstrate how the situation within the theater changed during 1942 to 1944. The hypothesis states the decision to launch Operation U-Go was detrimental to the Japanese position in Burma. Furthermore, the failure of the operation, presented FM Slim the opportunity for victory within the theater. This study tests the hypothesis by analyzing available documents on the Burma campaign through the lens of the three

²⁹ Japanese Monograph Series 134, "Burma Operations Record 15th Army Operations in Imphal Area and Withdrawal to Northern Burma" (Headquarters United States Army, Japan, 1957), 42-48; FM William Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, 18; John Masters, *The Road Past Mandalay*, 152.

previously mentioned criteria. This section also presents the sources of the data collection and expands on the selection of the research questions supplied in the introduction. This section proceeds through a discussion on case study focus, instrumentation, and data collection/analysis.

It is worthwhile to identify the reasoning behind the selection of the Japanese Fifteenth and British Fourteenth Armies for case study. The researcher chose the two armies because of their prominent combat roles in Burma. The units fought in the decisive battle of the campaign at Imphal and elements of both armies also fought in the initial Japanese invasion of Burma. Focusing the research on the changes to both armies during the two years of operations in Burma offers contextual information to evaluate the Japanese Army's decision to execute Operation U-Go.

This study relies upon a combination of the structured, focused approach as presented by Alexander George and Andrew Bennett and systems methodology, as described by Jamshid Gharajedaghi. The structure for the examination is created by categorizing the event, defining the research approach, and employing criterion of measure for explanatory purposes. An investigation into the hypothesis and sub-questions provides focus to the research. George and Bennett suggest a single event can provide a basis for research on a range of theoretical topics.³⁰ Additionally, insights into the relationships of the criteria with regard to the situation are derived from Gharajedaghi's method of systems thinking. Specifically the structure, process, function, and context of the criteria are considered in greater detail.³¹ Therefore, the two methodologies provide the framework for organizing the Burma campaign analysis.

The following questions, based upon the assessing the criteria, structure the case study analysis. The first question seeks to determine how the effective force ratios of the *Japanese*

³⁰ Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 67-70.

³¹ Jamshid Gharajedaghi, *Systems Thinking: Managing Chaos and Complexity* (London: Elsevier, 2006), 108-113.

Fifteenth and British Fourteenth Armies changed from 1942 to 1944. This is significant because it correlates to an army's capacity to achieve massed effects at the decisive point. The data reflects an army's potential to achieve mass at the decisive point relative to his adversary. The second question identifies the changes to air superiority during the Burmese campaign. The question investigates the role of air superiority in military operations and campaigns. It discusses how air superiority has a beneficial and relative effect to an army's ability to achieve massed effects at a decisive point. Moreover, it considers the role that air superiority plays in extending an army's operational reach. The final question considers how operational reach changed for both the Japanese and British Armies during the campaign. Focusing on changes to an army's operational reach is important because it describes the logistical factors, versus just the pure tactics, that affected the final outcomes. Furthermore, it suggests how obtaining air superiority can increase operational reach and also facilitate an army's ability to achieve massed effects at decisive points.

This section restated the purpose of this study and outlined the significance of the questions to be answered. The evaluation of Japan's Burma campaign followed a combination of the focused, structured approach and systems thinking methodology. The focus, structured approach provided a way to standardize the data collection during analysis of the case studies. Whereas the systems thinking technique offered the opportunity to investigate how the criteria related to each other and the campaign as a whole. Case studies of the Japanese Fifteenth and the British Fourteenth Armies were completed to describe how and why the situation in Burma changed and how it contributed to the final outcome. This research is important for students of military history and operational planners alike, because it offers a more comprehensive explanation to the results of the Burma campaign. The events are investigated from multiple perspectives, which provide greater insights into critical aspects that led to the final result. Furthermore, the case studies suggest a strong correlation and linkage between achieving massed effects at the decisive point, air superiority, and operational reach.

Strategic Context

When evaluating Japanese military decisions it is helpful to review the strategic context of the situation that influenced the decisions. Discussing key cultural features, theorists, and WWII military strategy provides a greater appreciation of what guided Japanese actions. These aspects influenced the army leaders' perceptions and shaped their mental approach to the Burma campaign. In light of this, a review is presented of relevant contextual information that contributed to the Japanese military leaders' judgment and their decisions.

The Japanese military in WWII was a weird amalgamation of Eastern and Western influences. The Japanese maintained their Eastern cultural ideas of Taoism, but modified their military views by incorporating Western concepts. The Japanese modernized their military in the second half of the 19th century. They hired naval officers from Great Britain and army officers from Prussia to train and modernize their navy and army.³² The end result yielded two branches of the military with differing philosophies on war fighting. It created friction and generated disjointed operations between the branches of the Japanese military throughout the war.³³ The disunity hindered Japan's ability to conduct large scale joint operations. The inter-service rivalry made forming and following a cohesive strategy difficult.³⁴ In sum, the Japanese army and navy may have shared a national culture, but the differences in their organizational identities complicated operations during WWII.

Culture and military theorists shaped the military thought and doctrine of the Japanese army. The military in pre-WWII Japan wielded tremendous influence over the society. The army

³² Edward J. Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army, Its Rise and Fall*, 47-69.

³³ Richard B. Frank, *Guadalcanal* (New York: Penguin Group, 1992), 252-255. Frank provides an example of Japanese Army and Navy's infighting during military operations on Guadalcanal in 1942-1943. The army blamed its failure on the navy for not achieving air superiority and for providing poor intelligence. Likewise the navy blamed the army for failing to employ its forces correctly once on land.

³⁴ Edward Drea, *In the Service of the Emperor*, 26-41.

inculcated the bushido code into the Japanese youth through pre-conscriptional and spiritual training. The bushido code was the Japanese warrior belief system, consisting of “denial of self, an ardent loyalty to the Emperor, and a devotion that glorifies death for the Emperor as life’s greatest reward.”³⁵ The code’s tenants framed how the individual soldier as well as the Japanese army viewed the execution of their military duties.

Another strong influencing factor was Japan’s period of intense nationalism prior to WWII. Japanese leaders, looking to overcome the tension between traditional Japanese ideals and the incorporation of Western ideas to their society, generated the nationalist movement around the concept of a “national polity.”³⁶ The national polity reconciled the differences by offering an ideological course that unified the Japanese people in service to the Emperor. It suggested the importance of the nation and state as a way to transcend the disparities between Eastern and Western thought.³⁷ The polity advocated the ideas of loyalty, filial piety, harmony, martial spirit, and bushido. The characteristics combined to form the Japanese national identity.

In addition to culture, military theorists influence operations by describing how activities should be pursued to achieve favorable results. The theorists offered lenses that militaries used to interpret phenomena and assign an organizing reason to the outcome of events. Militaries modified their methods and doctrine, which subsequently altered future military actions. In WWII, the Japanese army combined both Eastern and Western theorists due to their geostrategic positioning in the Far East and the country’s 19th century military modernization effort. During that time, the Japanese Army contracted Prussian instructors and adopted German doctrine

³⁵ Hillis Lory, *Japan’s Military Masters* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1943), 31.

³⁶ Ryusaku Tsunoda, Theodore de Bary, and Donald Keene, “Revolutionary Nationalism,” *Sources of Japanese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press: 1958), 784-792.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 786.

following the Franco-Prussian War.³⁸ As a result, Eastern and Western thought combined in a unique and fascinating way in the Japanese Army.

To better appreciate Eastern thought, it is useful to review concepts from an Eastern military theorist. Sun Tzu, the ancient Chinese general, shares the common cultural background of Taoism with the Japanese.³⁹ Although Chinese, his writings offer a potential interpretative lens to better understand the Eastern way of thinking. Sun Tzu's discussions of waging war, offensive strategy, and energy are particularly helpful in framing the approach of some Japanese commanders. His notions of wise generals feeding their troops on enemy stores and skilled generals seeking victory from the situation, not demanding it from their subordinates are useful concepts to keep in mind when evaluating the outcome of the Burma Theater.⁴⁰ It is also worth reviewing the Prussian influences from Clausewitz and Moltke.

Carl von Clausewitz and Helmuth von Moltke indirectly influenced the military philosophy and doctrine of the Japanese Army. Following Prussia's successful Wars of German unification, the Japanese sought to employ Prussian military expertise to modernize their army. Von Moltke, the Prussian Chief of Staff, selected Major Klemens Wilhelm Jakob Meckel to train the Japanese. It was Meckel, who introduced the Prussian theorists and their methods to the Japanese Army. He specifically conveyed the importance of the moral aspect in combat, emphasizing Clausewitz's notion of the clash of wills. Moreover, Meckel instructed the army on concentric maneuver techniques and the superiority of the envelopment maneuver.⁴¹ As demonstrated later in the examination of the Japanese Fifteenth Army, aspects of these influences

³⁸ Edward J. Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army, Its Rise and Fall*, 48-55, 57-61.

³⁹ Roger T. Ames, "Introduction," *Sun-Tzu The Art of Warfare* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 3-4.

⁴⁰ *Sun Tzu, The Art of Warfare*, 73-74, 93.

⁴¹ Edward J. Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army, Its Rise and Fall, 1853-1945*, 59; Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, 75.

were present in the Japanese commanders' decisions and helped shape the army's method of warfare.

Japanese Strategy

Japanese strategy laid the foundational basis for their military action in WWII. The strategy influenced where and how the Japanese prioritized their finite resources. It provided focus and helped to shape a military operational approach for the conduct of WWII. However, after initial success, flaws developed in the strategy forcing Japan to modify its approach based upon the means available to achieve its objectives. The history of and changes to the Japanese strategy offer insights into Japanese military approaches and commander's decision making processes for planning and execution of military operations. Comprehensive knowledge of the strategy provides a basis for evaluating a military commander's decisions.

On November 15th, 1941 the Imperial Headquarters –Government Liaison Conference adopted “the final Plan for the Successful Conclusion of Hostilities with Great Britain, the United States, the Netherlands and the Chungking Regime, otherwise known as the Fukuan plan.”⁴² It should be noted that this was the only codified war plan prior to the commencement of hostilities. The Japanese predicated the Fukuan plan on the possibility of rapid Japanese military victories in the Far East and Pacific. The Japanese believed the short-term victories would provide a position of strategic advantage, by securing areas rich in resources and by applying additional pressure on the beleaguered British Empire. In short the IGHQ planned a strategic defensive obtained through short term tactical and operational offensives. The Japanese based the plan on the two broad assumptions of German invincibility and the likelihood of the British surrender.⁴³ Unfortunately,

⁴² Kanji Akagi, “Leadership in Japan’s Planning for War Against Britain,” *British and Japanese Military Leadership in the Far Eastern War 1941-1945* (New York: Frank Cass, 2004), 54-55; Edward J. Drea, *Japan’s Imperial Army, Its Rise and Fall*, 221.

⁴³ Kanji Akagi, “Leadership in Japan’s Planning for War Against Britain,” *British and Japanese Military Leadership in the Far Eastern War 1941-1945*, 53.

for the Japanese both assumptions proved to be invalid. The assumptions, while easily identifiable as erroneous today, were much more uncertain and contingent during the time of the war plan's creation.

Although the strategy was not successful there are essential framing aspects that can be ascertained from the strategy's approach. Specifically, the Japanese goals to topple the Chiang government in mainland China and, in conjunction with the Axis Powers, defeat Great Britain. The Japanese believed the defeat of Britain would undermine US morale and erode the American will to continue the war. To achieve these goals the Japanese planners considered several direct and indirect approaches. One such plan consisted of a Japanese advance into West Asia and India in concert with the German advance into the Caucasus, Middle East, and North Africa region. The cooperative effort between Japan and Germany would threaten the British Empire's sphere of influence, resulting in their capitulation and defeat.⁴⁴

Initially formulated by the IGS in 1942 as Operation Twenty-one, the plan called for an offensive thrust against British military bases in Eastern India. The IGHQ unofficially instructed the Japanese Fifteenth Army, the recent conquerors of Burma, to determine the feasibility of the plan and its prospects.⁴⁵ The ambitiousness of the plan shocked General Iida, the Fifteenth Army Commander. He viewed it as unrealistic and attempted to prevent its implementation, by having his staff prepare an even more audacious operation. After completing the Operation Twenty-one plan, General Iida provided a negative assessment of the operations prospects to the IGHQ. The plan was subsequently suspended due to limitations in available operational strength. The priority of Japanese effort had shifted to the American threat in the Pacific.⁴⁶ Although, the Japanese

⁴⁴ Ibid, 55-56.

⁴⁵ Saburo Hayashi and Alvin Coox, *Kogun*, 92; Louis Allen, "Notes on Japanese Historiography: World War II," *Military Affairs*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Dec, 1971), 135.

⁴⁶ Kenichi Arakawa, "The Imphal Operation," *British and Japanese Military Leadership in the Far Eastern War 1941-1945*, 108.

leadership shelved Operation Twenty-one, several aspects of the plan reappeared in Operation U-Go in 1944.

Case Study

This section describes how the situation in the Burma theater changed from 1942 to 1944. It consists of case studies of the Japanese Fifteenth Army and the British Fourteenth Army analyzed using the three criteria of massed effects at the decisive point, air superiority, and operational reach. The results of the three criteria are used to test the hypothesis that the Japanese decision to launch Operation U-Go was detrimental to the campaign and created the opportunity for FM Slim's victory in Burma. The purpose of this study is to reframe the Burma campaign, by presenting a way to interpret the outcomes as a result of the changes in circumstances surrounding both armies. It offers a more comprehensive picture by evaluating the campaign from both a Japanese and British perspective.

This section consists of three parts. First, is an in-depth examination of the Japanese Fifteenth Army using the focused questions presented on pages 16-17. Next, the British Fourteenth Army is assessed using the same focused questions. The section concludes with a summary of the analysis and key points from the case studies.

Japanese Fifteenth Army

The Japanese are the bravest people I have ever met. They believed in something, and they were willing to die for it, for any smallest detail that would help to achieve it.

-John Masters, *The Road Past Mandalay*

The Fifteenth Army defeated the British forces in Burma and conquered the country in only five months in 1942. The Japanese won an amazing gamble.⁴⁷ They began the Burmese

⁴⁷ Ian Grant and Kazuo Tamayama, *Burma 1942: The Japanese Invasion*, 19.

invasion with two divisions that seized control of Rangoon and its critical sea line of communication. From that point forward, the victory over the British forces was both rapid and complete. The initial success of the Fifteenth Army was a product of planning, opportunity, and exploiting advantages in the situation. The Japanese achieved massed effects at decisive points because of their dominance in combat troop numbers, air superiority, and operational reach. These aspects proved critical to achieving success in the Burma theater.

This case study begins with a discussion of the Fifteenth Army's organization and leadership in 1942. Second is an examination of the Fifteenth Army with regards to the three criteria during that period. Third is an outline of the organization and leadership in 1944, followed by an assessment of the Japanese operations using the three criteria. Finally, the summary details the differences between 1942 and 1944 and discusses the implications.

The Japanese Army formed the Fifteenth Army in November of 1941. It was a component of the Japanese Southern Expeditionary Group based in Indo-China. The Army consisted of the 18th, 33rd, 55th, and 56th Divisions. The Japanese divisions were similar in size and composition to British divisions with a few exceptions. First, the infantry units within the Japanese division were appreciably larger than their British counterparts.⁴⁸ Second, the divisions had an Infantry Group HQ that was commanded by a Major-General, with his own small staff. The Japanese employed the HQ for command and control purposes when conducting dispersed operations. Finally, the Japanese had two distinct variations of divisions. Old divisions were units formed prior to 1941 and new divisions were formed after that year. The old divisions consisted of four rifle companies and one MMG company per battalion. The new divisions, in comparison had one less rifle company per battalion. The Fifteenth Army consisted of both two old and two new divisions. The 18th and 33rd were old divisions, while the 55th and 56th were new

⁴⁸ Ibid, 364-377.

divisions.⁴⁹ From its inception the Japanese Fifteenth Army was organized for combat, but the army required an experienced officer to lead its troops into battle.

IGHQ selected General Shojiro Iida to command the Fifteenth Army during the invasion of Burma. General Iida came from a distinguished military family. His father commanded the 4th Regiment of the Imperial Guards Division in the Russo-Japanese War, and later became the Division's commander. Not to be outdone, General Iida commanded the very same division during WWII in the China Theater. It was because of his performance that the IGHQ selected General Iida for command of an Army. They originally appointed him the commander of the Twenty-Fifth Army in preparation for the attack on Malaya. However, the command slate changed and the IGHQ selected General Iida to command the Fifteenth Army instead. Considered a serious soldier and tough commander, General Iida planned his army's operation through careful study of Burma and its British defense force.⁵⁰

The Japanese Army created the opportunity for massed effects by first understanding the environment. Prior to the invasion, the army gathered extensive intelligence and information about Burma and the British disposition within the country. The army sent general staff officers, using fake identities, into Burma. The army tasked the officers with assessing the conditions, establishing local allies, and studying the terrain with its logistical problems. The Japanese Army used the knowledge gained to prepare their forces for the future invasion. They created maps and booklets that were issued to their soldiers. The booklets provided an excellent summary of all the Japanese had learned about Burma and conducting military operations in the tropics. In the words of Ian Grant, a retired British General who fought in Burma, "A similar document would have been invaluable to British troops and to those Indian troops who could read English. As it was

⁴⁹ Ian Grant and Kazuo Tamayama, *Burma 1942: The Japanese Invasion*, 364-377; Japanese Monograph Series 134, "Burma Operations Record 15th Army Operations in Imphal Area and Withdrawal to Northern Burma," 14-16.

⁵⁰ Ian Grant and Kazuo Tamayama, *Burma 1942: The Japanese Invasion*, 46-48.

they were given no briefing before landing in Burma and were mostly entirely ignorant of the problems they would have to face.”⁵¹ In sum, the Japanese Army better prepared and trained their soldiers for combat operations in the Burma Theater.

The Japanese Fifteenth Army attained massed effects by identifying decisive points and exploiting potential opportunities with aggressive action. General Iida believed Rangoon was the key to capturing Burma. He knew the Rangoon port was Great Britain’s primary way of supplying and reinforcing their army in Burma. As a result, the Japanese Army identified several intermediate objectives which would lead to the capture of Rangoon. The Japanese believed the capture of the British Moulmein base and the seizure of river crossing sites on both the Salween and Sittang Rivers were critical to the success of their offensive. The Japanese chose these objectives because they offered a direct and expedient route to Rangoon.

The Fifteenth Army invaded Burma by concentrating two divisions on a narrow front, where British intelligence believed only one brigade could transit. The British defended Burma with two divisions. The 17th Division positioned along the Siamese border and the 1st Burma Division in depth, near major population centers. The two Japanese divisions focused their attack initially against one British division, the dispersed British 17th Division. A rough force ratio comparison at the division level shows that the Japanese held a two-to-one advantage. However, the Japanese divisions had a higher percentage of combat soldiers than the British divisions. A Japanese rifle company consisted of approximately two hundred riflemen about twice the amount in a British company.⁵² Another factor in the force disparity was the concentration of Japanese forces and the dispersion of the British. The 17th Division attempted to defend the entire Burma/Thailand border, whereas the Japanese Fifteenth Army attacked along only a narrow fifty mile avenue of approach. As a result, the Japanese obtained favorable force ratios during the

⁵¹ Ibid, 45.

⁵² Ian Grant and Kazuo Tamayama, *Burma 1942: The Japanese Invasion*, 93.

campaign's opening engagements. These differences contributed to the Japanese Fifteenth Army's ability to mass effects at decisive points. In addition to the ground operations, the Japanese also massed their numerically superior air force against the three Allied air squadrons that were stationed in Burma.

The Japanese achieved air superiority in the opening phases of the Burma campaign. The 5th Air Division, commanded by Lieutenant General Hideyoshi Obata, provided air support for the Fifteenth Army during the Burma campaign. The air division, known in Japanese as the Hikoshidan, was a flexible organization composed of various Flying Regiments, or Hikosentai, depending upon the type of operation to be performed. The 5th Air Division consisted of four air brigades, the 4th, 7th, 10th, and 12th. Each of the air brigades contained two to three regiments. The air brigades typically contained a mixture of both fighter and bomber regiments. For example, the 4th Air Group was composed of thirty fighters and seven light bombers and the 7th Air Group contained twenty-five fighters and fifty heavy bombers.⁵³ During the invasion of Burma the Japanese aircraft outnumbered the RAF and American fleets by greater than a three-to-one ratio.

The Japanese concentrated their aircraft either on bombing missions against British air fields or in support of ground operations. The 5th Air Division assigned the 10th Brigade to provide close air support to the Fifteenth Army along the avenue of approach between the Salween and Sittang Rivers. In comparison, the limited number of Allied aircraft, approximately 120 platforms, were used to defend airfields, protect population centers, and support ground operations. The Royal Air Force (RAF) and American Volunteer Group (AVG) pilots did not have the capacity to provide meaningful air support. By February, the combined RAF and AVG

⁵³ Michael Pearson, *The Burma Air Campaign: December 1941–August 1945* (South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword, 2006), 14-15, 31; Japanese Monograph Series 64, "Burma Air Operations Record (January 1942-August 1945)," (Headquarters United States Army, Japan, 1962), 21-25.

consisted of only two fighter squadrons and one bomber squadron, approximately fifty-three aircraft.⁵⁴ The Japanese had gained air superiority over the Burmese skies.

The 5th Air Division tasked the units with three missions: to conduct Air Annihilation Operations, support the ground operations, and reconnoiter the Adnaman Islands. The Japanese Air Annihilation Operations was roughly equivalent to the modern US military's offensive counterair operations. The policy was to destroy the enemy aircraft in the air or on the ground to obtain air supremacy. The priorities for destruction were Allied bombers, followed by fighters, and air transports. The principle Japanese tactic was to coordinate combined fighter-bomber attacks versus using the two platforms independently.⁵⁵ The 5th Air Division accomplished the support to ground forces by eliminating the Allied air threat, bombing communication nodes, and strafing Allied forces along the road and river networks.

The division's biggest contribution to the Fifteenth Army's invasion was a successful bombing campaign conducted against MAGWE, the sole remaining Allied air base in Burma. The bombing raid occurred on March 21st and 22nd, 1942 with additional support from the 7th and 21st Air Brigades of the 3rd Air Division.⁵⁶ The Japanese massed four bombing runs consisting of 159 bomber sorties supported by 194 fighter sorties against the air base. The raid wiped out the Allied air presence in Burma. The AVG evacuated their remaining three planes to China and the RAF flew their six Blenheims and eleven Hurricanes to Akyab.⁵⁷ The Japanese controlled the skies and used this advantage to increase their army's operational reach.

⁵⁴ Michael Pearson, *The Burma Air Campaign*, 31.

⁵⁵ Japanese Monograph Series 64, "Burma Air Operations Record, 10-11, 22-23.

⁵⁶ Japanese Monograph Series 64, "Burma Air Operations Record, 11-12; Michael Pearson, *The Burma Air Campaign*, 47-48.

⁵⁷ Ian Grant and Kazuo Tamayama, *Burma 1942: The Japanese Invasion*, 198-199; Japanese Monograph Series 64, "Burma Air Operations Record (January 1942-August 1945)," 11-12.

Maintaining logistical support was a challenge for the opposing armies in the Burma campaign. The difficult terrain and wet climate hindered the distribution of supplies, enhancing the value of supply depots. However, an army reduced its mobility by using depots, and the depots were vulnerable to enemy seizure. The Chinese military theorist, Sun Tzu, suggested that wise generals should use enemy stores to feed their troops. In the 1942 invasion of Burma, the Fifteenth Army adopted a similar approach. The army benefited from the capture of British supplies, air bases, and most importantly the sea port at Rangoon. The seizure of the supplies and infrastructure increased the distance that the Japanese could project their combat power. Although bold and audacious, the initial Japanese logistical support plan left only a small margin for error. The plan required the Japanese army to invade Burma across hills covered dense jungle that precluded using any vehicles for support. The Japanese relied upon pack animals and their own soldiers to carry the supplies the army would need.⁵⁸ The Fifteenth Army required quick and decisive victories to offset their logistical vulnerabilities.

The Japanese logistical approach complemented its tactics and use of the envelopment technique. The lighter logistical footprint enabled Japanese soldiers to move rapidly through the jungle. They were not forced to use roads like their motorized British counterparts. The light logistical footprint enabled the Japanese forces to circumvent British units and place obstacles on the road, blocking its use. The Japanese roadblocks isolated the British units and forced them to abandon equipment and supplies to save their lives. The Japanese used the abandoned equipment and supplies to continue their offensive actions.⁵⁹ The capture of these supplies contributed in a small way to the Japanese success; however, the seizure of Rangoon radically shifted the logistical situation in the Burma campaign.

⁵⁸ Ian Grant and Kazuo Tamayama, *Burma 1942: The Japanese Invasion*, 60-61.

⁵⁹ FM William Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, 115-116; Shawn P. Steele, "Field Marshal Slim-Theoretical Thinking and the Impact of Theory on Campaign Planning," Monograph (Fort Leavenworth: School of Advanced Military Studies, 2012), 19-21.

Prior to the capture of Rangoon, the Japanese 33rd and 55th Divisions relied upon a line of communication that stretched two hundred miles over hills and through the jungle into Thailand. The Japanese and Thai engineers made improvements to the road making it passable for vehicles, but the logistical situation still required pack animals to move the majority of supplies.⁶⁰ Because of this, the Japanese transported only a limited quantity of supplies. The seizure of the port of Rangoon changed the logistical state of the Fifteenth Army. It enabled the army to shift their primary line of communication of supplies and reinforcements to the sea. The possession of the port increased the Japanese logistical capacity while severing the sole British line of communication. Moreover, the Japanese were able to extend the reach of their air craft by occupying and repairing previously held British air bases in Southern Burma. The Japanese Fifteenth Army gained a decisive advantage in operational reach with their seizure of Rangoon. However, the advantage dissipated over the next two years due to Japan's reprioritization of resources and the Allied interdiction of Japanese shipping.

Japan reorganized its forces inside of Burma in March 1943, creating the Burma Area Army. The army, commanded by General Masakazu Kawabe, was created to coordinate tactical and political actions. The Burma Area Army served as the higher headquarters to the Japanese Fifteenth Army. The Fifteenth Army, now commanded by General Renya Mutaguchi, was responsible for the defense of central and Northern Burma, over a seven hundred mile wide front. The Japanese Army also reorganized the Fifteenth Army. It added the 31st and 15th Divisions in preparation for the Imphal operation, while reallocating the 56th Division to the newly created Thirty-Third Army.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Ibid, 61.

⁶¹ Japanese Monograph Series 134, "Burma Operations Record 15th Army Operations in Imphal Area and Withdrawal to Northern Burma," 16-17.

The IGHQ selected General Mutaguchi to replace General Iida as the Fifteenth Army commander in the spring of 1943. General Mutaguchi, previously the commander of the 18th Division, was an aggressive military leader who sought personal glory from his exploits.⁶² He is pictured in Figure seven, sitting in the middle of the Japanese officers.



JAPANESE FIFTEENTH ARMY COMMANDER AND STAFF. Seen left to right, front row, are Lt. Gen. Genzo Yanagida, Commander, 33d Division, General Tanaka, Commander, 18th Division, General Mutaguchi, Commander, Fifteenth Army, Lt. Gen. Sukezo Matsuyama, Commander, 56th Division, and Lt. Gen. Kotoku Sato, Commander, 31st Division.

Figure 5. Japanese Fifteenth Army Leadership.

Source: US Army in World War II, *China-Burma-India: Stillwell's Mission to China* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1953), 129.

The aggressive trait manifested itself in Mutaguchi's insistence to execute his grandiose offensive plan against Eastern India. He initially detracted from the idea of Operation Twenty-one, but later embraced the operation while serving as commander of the Fifteenth Army. Many sources suggest this was in part due to General Wingate's Chindit expedition, Operation Loincloth, in 1943. The expedition deeply affected Mutaguchi, making him believe the Japanese defensive

⁶² Japanese Monograph Series 134, "Burma Operations Record 15th Army Operations in Imphal Area and Withdrawal to Northern Burma," 33; Kenichi Arakawa, "The Imphal Operation," *British and Japanese Military Leadership in the Far Eastern War 1941-1945*, 109; Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 361.

positions were vulnerable to British counterattack. As a result, he thought a pre-emptive strike against Imphal was the only way to establish an adequate defense. Even after criticism from several officers, at multiple levels Mutaguchi persisted believing the Japanese fighting spirit would overcome any obstacle.⁶³ He made his decision to launch Operation U-Go without an appreciation of how the changes in the situation would affect the operation. Mutaguchi failed to anticipate changes to his enemy's tactics, as well as negative effects associated with the loss of air superiority and exceeding his army's operational reach. These factors contributed to the Japanese Army's inability to seize Imphal.

The Fifteenth Army attacked Imphal and Kohima with three reinforced divisions, the 33rd, 15th, and 31st Divisions. The 15th Division was the main effort, tasked with capturing Imphal. The 33rd Division attacked on the 15th Division's left flank in the South, and the 31st Division attacked North of Imphal to seize Kohima. The army used three divisions to attack three British divisions in a defensive posture, a rough one-to-one ratio instead of the preferred three-to-one ratio for the attack. Even after accounting for the higher percentage of combat troops in a Japanese division, the force was still below a two-to-one ratio. The Japanese Army tried to alter the relative combat power by reducing the number of British forces around Imphal. They conducted Operation Ha-Go, an Arakan offensive in February 1944, with the objective of compelling the Fourteenth Army to commit its reserve to the Arakan. The objective was realized because Slim committed his reserve, the 26th and 36th Divisions, to the battle.⁶⁴ However, the Fifteenth Army was unsuccessful in their other attempts to reduce the British forces at Imphal.

⁶³ Kenichi Arakawa, "The Imphal Operation," *British and Japanese Military Leadership in the Far Eastern War 1941-1945*, 109-112; Japanese Monograph Series 134, "Burma Operations Record 15th Army Operations in Imphal Area and Withdrawal to Northern Burma," 29-32; Saburo Hayashi and Alvin Coox, *Kogun*, 93; Louis Allen, "Notes on Japanese Historiography: World War II," 135; Shelford Bidwell, *The Chindit War: Stillwell, Wingate, and the Campaign in Burma: 1944* (New York: Macmillan, 1979), 25-26.

⁶⁴ Japanese Monograph Series 134, "Burma Operations Record 15th Army Operations in Imphal Area and Withdrawal to Northern Burma," 80-83; FM William Slim, *Defeat into Victory*,

The army attempted to replicate their success in 1942, by employing the same tactic of cutting the British lines of communication with an envelopment maneuver. The 33rd Division enveloped the British 17th Division, South of Imphal on the Tiddim Road. However, the tactic lost its effectiveness because the British used their air force to resupply the 17th Division and a mobile reserve, the 23rd Division, to break the envelopment. The Japanese failed to mass effects without their ability to isolate and defeat British units in detail.⁶⁵ Furthermore the Imphal plains favored the British air and armor firepower over the Japanese infantry. The open terrain reduced the Fifteenth Army's ability to mass its forces, because the British could observe the Japanese infantry and mass fires from its artillery and air assets.

Japan lost air superiority in Burma for three reasons: the redeployment of air assets to other theaters, Japan's limited aircraft production capacity, and increased losses due to improvements in the Allied qualitative and numerical size of their air fleets. During the invasion of Burma, the 5th Air Division supported the assault with four air brigades consisting of a total of eleven air regiments. By December 1942, only six air regiments remained in Burma (totaling fifty fighters and ninety bombers), due to the redeployment of air assets to other theaters.⁶⁶ It was a drastic reduction when compared to the division's strength during the invasion. For Operation U-Go, the Japanese Army reinforced the 5th Air Division with two additional air regiments however the reinforcement lasted for only two weeks in March. Moreover, the British Chindit operation in 1944 complicated the division's mission. The operation forced the air division to split its offensive capability between Imphal and Northern Burma.⁶⁷ As a result, the Japanese Army failed

234-246; Sir James Kirby, *The War Against Japan*, Volume III, 140-159, 190-191.

⁶⁵ John Costello, "The Common Cause," *The Pacific War* (New York: Quill, 1981), 470.

⁶⁶ Japanese Monograph Series 64, "Burma Air Operations Record (January 1942-August 1945)," 24, 27, 32, 34; Japanese Monograph Series 134, "Burma Operations Record 15th Army Operations in Imphal Area and Withdrawal to Northern Burma," 5. Sir James Kirby, *The War Against Japan*, Volume II, 433, 476, 520.

⁶⁷ Japanese Monograph Series 64, "Burma Air Operations Record (January 1942-August

to concentrate its limited air fleet at the decisive point. They no longer possessed sufficient airpower to mass against the increasingly dominant Allied air fleet. This was in part due to the Japanese inability to produce replacement aircraft to overcome the amount of losses inflicted by the Allied air forces.

The rising aircraft losses and limited access to raw materials overwhelmed the Japanese aircraft industry. The Allied introduction of new fighters and bombers, specifically the American P-51 Mustang and the British Spitfire, created greater disparity in the air, resulting in an increased number of Japanese losses. Christopher Bayly, author of *Forgotten Armies*, suggested “Japan needed 40,000 aircraft a year to compensate for the numbers being steadily shot down by the Allies.”⁶⁸ In June 1943, Hideki Tojo called for an increased production of aircraft. The Japanese military hoped to triple aircraft production to 55,000. However, after prioritizing resources, the Japanese produced between 17,000 and 18,000 in 1943, far short of their desired goal. The shortages of raw materials and production capacity only intensified later in the war.⁶⁹ The production limitation compelled the Japanese to abandon the strategic offensive as it became more difficult to resupply forward position units, a feature which became synonymous with the 1944 Imphal offensive.

The Fifteenth Army exceeded their operational reach during Operation U-Go for three reasons. First the army failed to appreciate the effects of the operational environment on their lines of communication. As stated by Jon Masters, “the Japanese would be like divers at the end

1945),” 69-72; Micheal Pearson, *The Burma Air Campaign*, 115; Japanese Monograph Series 134, “Burma Operations Record 15th Army Operations in Imphal Area and Withdrawal to Northern Burma,” 75; Shelford Bidwell, *The Chindit War*, 102-155; John Masters, *The Road Past Mandalay*, 167,181.

⁶⁸ Christopher Bayly, *Forgotten Armies*, 360.

⁶⁹ David Rooney, *Burma Victory: Imphal, Kohima, and the Chindit Issue, March 1944 to May 1945* (London: Arms and Armour Press. 1992), 61; Micheal Pearson, *The Burma Air Campaign*, 105-106, 115-116; Edward Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army*, 231-232.

of a long lifeline that stretched two hundred miles behind them, through dense jungle and mountain across a major river, the Chidwin.”⁷⁰ However, the Japanese logistical predicament was even worse than Masters described, because the entire line of supply stretched almost one thousand miles back to Rangoon. Second the Japanese army developed an overly aggressive plan that allowed only a small margin for error. The plan lacked flexibility and was excessively reliant on the seizure of British supplies. The Japanese carried three weeks of supplies with them for an operation that lasted four months. The army culminated when they could not capture the British supply depots. Finally, the army failed to account for the Allied interdiction of their supply lines. Both the Allied bombers and the British Chindits disrupted the flow of Japanese supplies by destroying or damaging railroads, supply depots, and vehicle convoys.⁷¹ All three factors created a brutal and unforgiving environment for the Fifteenth Army during the battle for Imphal.

By 1944, the situation in Burma no longer favored the Japanese army. Several changes occurred that precipitated the drastic shift between Japan’s successful invasion in 1942 and its failed Operation U-Go in 1944. First, the Fifteenth Army no longer held an advantage in massed effects at decisive points. The Japanese went from a four-to-one force ratio during the invasion to a one-to-one and ultimately a one-to-two ratio at the conclusion of the battle of Imphal. Second, the Japanese lost air superiority, and with it the ability to prevent Allied aerial resupply and troop movement. Finally, Operation U-Go eclipsed the logistical capacity of the Fifteenth Army. The army operationally overreached and struggled to supply its forces over a thousand mile long line of communication. The three factors of massed effects at the decisive point, air superiority, and

⁷⁰ Jon Masters, *The Road Past Mandalay*, 152.

⁷¹ Japanese Monograph Series 134, “Burma Operations Record 15th Army Operations in Imphal Area and Withdrawal to Northern Burma,” 46,48,70-73,75; Kenichi Arakawa, “The Imphal Operation,” *British and Japanese Military Leadership in the Far Eastern War 1941-1945*, 111-120; Louis Allen, *Burma: The Longest War 1941-1945* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1984), 193; Micheal Pearson, *The Burma Air Campaign*, 105, 123-125; Edward Drea, *Japan’s Imperial Army*, 238. Christopher Bayly, *Forgotten Armies*, 381-382, 388; Jon Masters, *The Road Past Mandalay*, 219; John Costello, “The Common Cause,” *The Pacific War*, 466, 470.

operational reach reflected how the situation changed for the Japanese Fifteenth Army in Burma during 1942 to 1944. The three elements were interlinked and complementary to each other. Possession of air superiority enabled an army to extend its operational reach, and in the case of the British, develop a new approach to fight the Japanese army.

British Fourteenth Army

There comes a moment in every battle against a stubborn enemy when the result hangs in the balance. Then the general, however skillful and far sighted he may have been, must hand over to his soldiers, and leave them to complete what he has begun.

-Field Marshal William Slim, *Defeat into Victory*

The story of the Fourteenth Army is one of perseverance and problem reframing. The Japanese army gained and maintained the initiative after their invasion in 1942. They forced the British army to conduct the longest retreat in its military history. However, the Fourteenth Army bloodied, but not beaten adapted its tactics and methods to the operational environment. The Fourteenth Army maximized its strength of firepower and mobility while exploiting the Japanese weaknesses of operational reach and air support.

This case study begins with a discussion of the changes to the British army's structure in the Burma theater in 1942 and 1944. Next, the British army is assessed using the three criteria of massed effects, air superiority, and operational reach. The assessment focuses on describing how the Fourteenth Army both benefitted and used the changes to the situation to its advantage during the later stages of the campaign. Finally, a summary of the findings highlights the key details and discusses their implications for the campaign.

The victorious British Fourteenth Army was a very different formation when compared to the British army that defended Burma during the Japanese invasion. In 1942, the British had two divisions securing Burma, the recently created 1st Burma Division, formed in July 1941, and the 17th Division. The British supported the divisions with three fighter squadrons composed of mainly Hurricane and Blenheim models. The divisions consisted largely of combat inexperienced

soldiers and new recruits. Moreover, the majority of the British soldiers in the divisions were trained for desert combat not jungle warfare. Paraphrasing from the British military history, the Burma army was unfit for war with a military power. However, by 1944 the British made drastic changes to their army in the Burma theater, creating the Fourteenth Army in August 1943. The army consisted of two corps, the IV and XV Corps (a total of seven divisions), supported by twenty air squadrons of the 221st Air Group.⁷² As a whole, it was a more robust and capable organization that was built for combat operations. The Fourteenth Army was capable of achieving massed effects at decisive points, unlike the 1942 British Burma defense force. Since the Fourteenth Army now possessed the ability to mass its effects, the next critical aspect was identifying what was decisive.

In 1944 FM Slim determined the Imphal plain was decisive to the outcome of the Burma campaign. Prior to the initial engagements of the battle, British intelligence indicated that the Japanese Army was preparing a major offensive against the Assam region in Eastern India. Slim believed the Japanese were seeking a decisive battle and looked to Imphal to attain their objectives.⁷³ Slim knew how important possession of Imphal was for military operations in Burma. He described its significance in this way:

The Imphal plain, some forty by twenty miles in extent, is the only considerable oasis of flat ground in the great sweep of mountains between India and Burma. It lies roughly equi-distant from the Brahmaputra Valley and the plains of Central Burma, a natural half-way house and staging place for any great military movement in either direction between India and Burma.⁷⁴

Slim's correct identification of the Imphal plains as the decisive point, afforded him the opportunity to plan how best to mass his army's lethal effects.

⁷² Sir James Kirby, *The War Against Japan*, Volume II and III, 13, 439-441, 466, 468, 503-504; FM William Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, 115-118; Ian Grant, *Burma 1942*, 35-43, 359-363, 367-368.

⁷³ FM William Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, 285.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 286.

Slim contemplated three possible alternatives to fight the Japanese: anticipate the Japanese offensive and attack first across the Chidwin River, hold the Japanese 33rd Division South in the Tiddim area and destroy the remainder as they crossed the Chidwin, or to concentrate his IV Corps on the Imphal plain and fight the battle on ground of their choosing. Slim chose the third option because he wanted to maximize his firepower and destroy the Japanese Fifteenth Army. He sought to concentrate a superior force in both numbers and armament against the Japanese.⁷⁵

To generate mass and a favorable force ratio, Slim repositioned units, requested reinforcements from the 11th Army Group, and fortified the defenses around Imphal. Central to Slim's plan was IV Corp. IV Corp, commanded by General Geoffrey Scoones, was the primary defender of the Imphal plains. Scoones organized the Corp's defense with two divisions forward, the 17th and 20th Divisions, and one in reserve as a mobile striking force, the reinforced 23rd Division located at Imphal.⁷⁶

In addition to these forces Slim proposed repositioning the 5th and 7th Divisions from the Arakan to Imphal and requested another division to secure the Dimapur supply depot. General George Giffard, the commander of the 11th Army Group, concurred with Slim's plan and arranged to transport the 5th Division. However, the 11th Army Group did not support the request for the second division to Dimapur. Giffard compromised with Slim by sending the Indian Parachute Brigade and making arrangements to send the 2nd Division from India if needed. Scoones used the Parachute Brigade to reinforce the 23rd Division. As a result of these adjustments, the Fourteenth Army had three reinforced divisions in a defensive posture opposing the three attacking Japanese divisions during the opening engagements of the Battle of Imphal.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 289-291.

⁷⁶ FM William Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, 287-288. Sir James Kirby, *The War Against Japan*, Volume III, 187-189.

The British had generated a force ratio of closer to one-to-one, which favored them as the defender. As the battle progressed, the Fourteenth Army added three more divisions, the 5th, 2nd, and 7th Divisions, increasing their advantage to almost a two-to-one ratio on the ground.⁷⁷ The British won the battle of numbers on the ground, but they dominated in the skies during the entire engagement.

The British possessed air supremacy during the Battle of Imphal, something they sorely lacked during Japanese invasion of Burma in 1942. The air supremacy created a three-fold effect for the Fourteenth Army. It afforded the British the opportunity to provide close air support, conduct aerial resupply, and most importantly to air transport portions of three divisions to the battle front. The transportation of the 5th, 2nd, and 7th Divisions created a decisive numerical advantage for the Fourteenth Army during the battle that the Japanese were unable to overcome. To offer an appreciation for how many flights this required, moving the 5th Division alone took 758 sorties. The 194th Squadron with support from American transports moved the entire division, troops, guns, jeeps, and mules, 260 miles from the Arakan to Imphal in only ten days.⁷⁸ In total, the British used eight transport squadrons, plus additional C-46s from the “Hump” route to support the air movement and resupply missions.⁷⁹ The squadrons provided critical relief to the 17th Division as well as the Imphal and Kohima garrisons when they were enveloped and cut-off by the Japanese. The transport squadrons played such vital role in supporting the Fourteenth Army that Slim referred to air transport as the distinctive feature of the Burma campaign.⁸⁰ The

⁷⁷ Sir James Kirby, *The War Against Japan*, Volume III, 187-204.

⁷⁸ Sir James Kirby, *The War Against Japan*, Volume III, 235; Micheal Pearson, *The Burma Air Campaign*, 174; FM William Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, 300-306.

⁷⁹ Group Captain Deryck Grocock, “Air Transport and Supply,” *The RAF and the Far East War 1941-1945*. Bracknell Paper No 6 (Brighton: Royal Air Force Historical Society, March 1995), 49; Sir James Kirby, *The War Against Japan*, Volume III, 321-327, 512-515.

⁸⁰ FM William Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, 543-546.

transport created the mass on the ground, but the bomber and fighter squadrons provided invaluable close air support.

The 221st Group and 224th Group provided close air support to the Fourteenth Army during the fighting. The Groups consisted of an average strength of eighty bombers and 180 fighter/bombers. To present a clearer picture of what these numbers equated to in air power, just two squadrons from the 221st Group flew over 25,000 sorties in support of the Fourteenth Army between March and July 1944.⁸¹ The RAF worked in close coordination with the ground units to deliver their lethal effects which blunted the Japanese offensive. Due to this fact, the *Japanese* Fifteenth Army was unable to effectively mass its forces on plains of Imphal.⁸² Furthermore the Strategic Air Force assisted by providing both close air support in vicinity of Imphal and interdicting the Japanese lines of communications in depth. The air interdiction slowed the flow of Japanese reinforcements to Imphal and reduced the critical Japanese resupply along the Burma/Siam railway from 750 tons to 150 tons per month.⁸³ The British used their air supremacy to both reduce the Japanese operational reach and to increase their own.

During the Battle for Imphal the Fourteenth Army maintained an operational reach advantage relative to the Fifteenth Army because of their short lines of communication and aerial resupply capability. The main British line of communication was a north/south running road that connected Imphal, Kohima, and terminated at the Dimapur supply depot. The road was a distance of 125 miles. A significant advantage when compared to the Japanese line of communication that extended over three hundred miles to Mandalay and an additional six hundred miles to Rangoon.

⁸¹ Micheal Pearson, *The Burma Air Campaign*, 174; Air Vice Admiral A.D. Dick, "Offensive Air Operations in Support of the Army," *The RAF and the Far East War 1941-1945*, Bracknell Paper No 6, 41. Julian Thompson, *War in Burma*, 355.

⁸² Micheal Pearson, *The Burma Air Campaign*, 119-123; FM William Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, 303, 543-544.

⁸³ Air Vice Admiral A.D. Dick, "Offensive Air Operations in Support of the Army," *The RAF and the Far East War 1941-1945*, Bracknell Paper No 6, 46.

Even with this advantage Slim viewed the road as his critical vulnerability because of the possibility of a Japanese envelopment. Slim developed his plan to shorten his army's line of communication by concentrating his forces on the Imphal plain. As he stated in his memoir, "I was tired of fighting the Japanese when they had a good line of communications behind them and I had an execrable one. This time I would reverse the procedure."⁸⁴

Additionally, the Allied air supremacy afforded Slim the possibility of conducting aerial resupply to his forces at Imphal. Between March and June 1944, the Allied air forces transported over 34,000 long tons of supplies throughout Burma, of which 18,000 long tons went to IV Corp at Imphal. As a result, the Fourteenth Army was able to continue fighting even though its line of communication was temporarily severed by the Japanese Fifteenth Army. In effect, the aerial resupply capability extended the Fourteenth Army's operational reach. The army demonstrated it on multiple occasions during the Chindit, Arakan, and Imphal Operations.⁸⁵ It was a marked advantage that the British forces did not possess in 1942 due to their limited air capacity and the Japanese control of the skies.

The situation for the British army dramatically changed in Burma from 1942 to 1944. In 1942 the British defended Burma with two ill-prepared and poorly structured divisions, supported by only three fighter squadrons. The divisions were overmatched facing a larger, more experienced Japanese force, who exploited the British army's weaknesses. However, by 1944 the British Fourteenth Army was a markedly different unit. It was a larger more capable force that was supported by twenty air squadrons instead of three. The army could mass its effects to defeat a comparable Japanese force, because of improvements in personnel, equipment, and training. Moreover, the British now possessed air superiority, which increased their ability to both mass

⁸⁴ FM William Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, 291.

⁸⁵ Sir James Kirby, *The War Against Japan*, Volume III, 512-517; Micheal Pearson, *The Burma Air Campaign*, 108,113,126-133; FM William Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, 306,315-317, 544-546.

effects against the Japanese and extend their operational reach. Even with these advantages, FM Slim carefully selected the Fourteenth Army's approach in order to maximize its strengths and exploit the Japanese weaknesses.⁸⁶ The Japanese Fifteenth Army obliged Slim and the British Fourteenth Army, by attacking Imphal without an accurate appreciation of how the changes to the situation affected the Japanese operation. The British used their advantages in both air superiority and operational reach to mass their effects at the decisive battle of the campaign and decimate the Japanese Fifteenth Army.

Conclusion

The Japanese Fifteenth Army's Burma Campaign 1942-1945, is an illustration of how fortunes change in war. The Fifteenth Army's initial success over the British army did not last indefinitely. By July 1944, it was the defeated Japanese army, not the British, in retreat across the jungles and rivers of Burma. The Japanese army grossly miscalculated its operational capacity and wasted its finite resources in pursuit of unrealistic objectives. The Fifteenth Army's high stakes gamble led to its destruction and provided FM Slim the opportunity for a decisive victory in Burma. Thus in Western literature, FM William Slim became synonymous with the victorious WWII Burma campaign. However, there were several other factors that contributed to the results of the conflict, like the operational environment, Japanese military decisions, and achieving massed effects at the decisive points.

The Burmese environment constrained the operations of both armies. Burma's mountains, rivers, and fetid jungles limited the available routes and restricted ground maneuvers. It magnified the importance of key terrain, like ports, airfields, and river crossing sites. The tropical climate precluded rapid movement during the monsoon season by flooding the country's rivers and their tributaries. To add further complication, the jungles were burgeoning with

⁸⁶ FM William Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, 221.

tropical maladies and disease. It was a hostile environment. The armies needed to master their surroundings before they ever bested their adversary.

Culture and strategy influenced the Japanese Army's decision to execute Operation U-Go. From a cultural perspective, the Japanese believed they were a chosen people and the elite Asian race.⁸⁷ Their filial piety and bushido code created warriors who were loyal, dedicated, and believed that dying for the Emperor was the greatest honor they could achieve in their lives. Furthermore, the Japanese strategy called for tactical offensive operations in order to set the conditions for a strategic defense. However, Operation Twenty-one was different. It called for a major offensive against East India that would have strategic consequences. If successful the operation may have removed the Allied threat from the Asian continent, but it was too ambitious for the resources available.

In addition to the Japanese strategy, contextual aspects of the situation also contributed to the decision. General Wingate's first Chindit expedition, Operation Longcloth, left an indelible impression on General Mutaguchi.⁸⁸ Mutaguchi believed there was a major error in the Japanese geographic understanding of Burma. He thought the current defensive perimeter was insufficient and would collapse if the British attacked in force. Framed in this mentality, Mutaguchi advocated for conducting the Imphal offensive, Operation U-Go. He believed that his army's fighting spirit would overcome the improbable odds of a long supply line and lack of air superiority to achieve victory. Far from attaining success, the Fifteenth Army's failure was produced by several related and interdependent factors.

⁸⁷ Military Intelligence Directorate, "Japanese in Battle: Part 1, Enemy Methods" (General Headquarters: India, May 1943), 1-3.

⁸⁸ Louis Allen, *Burma: The Longest War*, 133-149; Kenichi Arakawa, "The Imphal Operation," *British and Japanese Military Leadership in the Far Eastern War 1941-1945*, 107-109.

The army planned for an aggressive offensive operation without an accurate assessment of the situation. They failed to account for changes to the British tactics and therefore underestimated the force ratios at the battle of Imphal. Furthermore, the Fifteenth Army did not recognize the full significance of the British air superiority. They misconceived of how the British would use close integration between air and ground assets to launch a counterattack and resupply its enveloped forces.⁸⁹ Finally the army did not accurately anticipate the extent to which the operational environment would affect their plan. The Japanese left only a thin logistical margin for error. A failure to achieve a rapid victory or capture British supplies exposed its fatal weakness, logistical support. The operation left the Japanese army dangerously exposed, unlike their successful invasion and conquest of Burma.

During their 1942 invasion, the Fifteenth Army held the advantage over the British in several key areas. They achieved massed effects at decisive points by concentrating their army against the dispersed British forces. The JAAF gained air superiority by using their numerically superior air fleet to conduct air annihilation operations, and support the Fifteenth Army's ground offensive. Their efforts led to temporary air supremacy over Burma until the end of 1942. Finally, the army ensured their forces continued the offensive by prioritizing the importance of their supply lines of communication. The Fifteenth Army's capture of Rangoon shortened their lines of communication and provided a decisive advantage in operational reach over their enemy. These successes propelled the army into conquering the remainder of Burma. With this in mind, the question then becomes how to reconcile these two very different outcomes. Should the differences be attributed to one man's military competency and leadership abilities or is there another better option available?

⁸⁹ Japanese Monograph Series 134, "Burma Operations Record: 15th Army Operations in the Imphal Area and Withdrawal to Northern Burma," 10.

Clausewitz suggested that war was a clash of wills between two living forces. This implies the existence of two sides to each conflict. Both sides have their own interests, objectives, and strategy. Therefore, evaluating a campaign and attributing casual explanations using only one perspective yields an incomplete picture of the events. A better analysis considers both perspectives and searches for changes within the environment or system that potentially influenced the end result. To further emphasize the point, Sun Tzu articulated that if you know your enemy and know yourself, than in one hundred battles you will never be in peril. Knowledge of both sides can make the warrior invincible.⁹⁰ In the end, an evaluation of the Fifteenth Army's Burma campaign does exactly the same. It searches for reasons, extraneous to FM William Slim, that offer an explanation into how and why the situation in the Burmese campaign radically changed.

⁹⁰ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, 75-77; *Sun Tzu: The Art of Warfare*, 151.

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